

PARENTAL BURNOUT AND MENTAL HEALTH OF MARRIED INDIVIDUALS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has been context altering as it has and still alters the dimensions of social, economic, and intimate lives of people. With reference to this, parenting; an already tough task, in the disarray caused by COVID-19 pandemic, has elevated parental burnout and declined mental health of married individuals. In the present context, it is imperative to understand how parents are coping and managing their lives. The present research aimed to examine prevalence of both parental burnout and mental health and how parental burnout affects married individuals. For the present research, married individuals ($N = 350$) within an age range of 25 to 65 years ($M = 35.42$, $SD = 9.29$) were approached from different cities of Pakistan through purposive sampling. Parental

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burnout and mental health were measured using Parental Burn Out Scale (Roskam et al., 2018) and Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Severe parental burnout symptoms prevailed in .6% parents. Females had moderate symptoms of declined mental health as compared to males (11.1 % depressed, 25.4 % anxiety, and 7.9 % stress). The findings indicated significant positive association between parental burnout and mental health, indicating declined mental health among married individuals. The prevalence of parental burnout and declined mental health among parents indicated the gravity of the situation for developing countries where most of the mothers are stay-at-home spouses and have limited resources to look after their mental health. The findings of the present study could provide a baseline for clinicians to design interventions for parents to cope with stress of parenting as well as taking care of their mental health not only in the on-going pandemic but in general stressful times.

Key Words: Anxiety, COVID-19, Depression, Mental Health, Parental Burnout, Stress.

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the lives of people globally. The lower-middle-income countries have been affected the most owing to their meagre financial resources (Bong et al., 2020; Evans & Over, 2020; Gupta et al., 2020). The imposed lockdown to curtail the spread of the pandemic by governments had its toll on economic, social, as well as intimate lives of the people (Ali et al., 2020; Rasul et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Work from home and online education was quickly adopted as a new normal (Whiting, 2021). The efforts of maintaining and adjusting with the new work-life along with the social isolation took a toll on the mental health of people (Clair et al., 2021; De Kock et

al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Mukhtar, 2020). With the new work environment, new responsibilities were also introduced. For instance, parents worked round the clock to take care of the needs of their kids along with their jobs and home chores (Cheng et al., 2021; North, 2020). Both home schooling and work from home took a toll on the mental health of parents (Kusin & Choo, 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). Additionally, homeschooling of children further posed a financial burden on parents i.e., provision of technological gadgets (laptops, tablets or mobile) (Ali, 2021) and internet availability (packages or devices) (Barry et al., 2021). Consequently, mental health of parents and family runners were greatly affected (Abuhammad, 2020; Refaeli & Achdut, 2021). Fearing the worst, the ongoing pandemic and its effect on the mental health is more likely to set a precedent for future. Therefore, the present research aimed to examine the prevalence of parental burnout and mental health (depression, anxiety, and stress) of parents and how it has affected marital satisfaction of married individuals.

Considering the current pandemic and economic situation of Pakistan, parents are under a lot of stress due to financial instability (Wang et al., 2021; Zafar et al., 2021). As 27.31 million people have either lost their jobs or faced reduced wages in Pakistan (Latif, 2020; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Sareen, 2020). Adjacent to this, tending to the constant demands of children, providing them with the necessary care, love, attention, and fulfilling their needs of food, education, and welfare is a constant and hard struggle parents undergo (Breiner et al., 2016). Additionally, electronic gadgets and their accessories (including internet packages) only adds more restrained of parents (Picca et al., 2021; Prikhidko et al., 2020). As most of the families in lower-middle-income countries specially Pakistan lives on daily basis and these extra financial burden as well as parental

responsibilities take negative toll on parents, drain their energy, and exhaust them (Nishtar, 2020; Somro & Qureshi, 2020).

The enervation among parents due to their parenting responsibilities are termed as *parental burnout* (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018; Mikolajczak et al., 2019). Parents tends to childcare duties along with their office work and household chores. Thus, parental burnout is the chronic condition stemmed from continuous stress or anxiety due to these conflicting responsibilities and mismatch between parental demands and resources (Mortensen & Barnett, 2015; Mikolajczak et al., 2017). Children's responsibilities alone are impactful enough to induce parenting stress (Raphael et al., 2010), the addition of external stressors like pandemic and financial instability further worsened the conditions resulting in declined physical and mental health of parents (Mikolajczak et al., 2018).

Mental health is the effective functioning of individuals containing emotional, social, and psychological functioning of individuals influencing their daily life (WHO, 2019; Westerhof & Keyes, 2009). Mental health issues are very likely to be induced due to various factors (i.e., increased workload, trauma, financial stressor, or increased parental responsibilities) (Wu & Xu, 2020). Any negative effect on mental condition (i.e., depression, anxiety, or stress) can not only have negative consequences on physical health but also negatively affects their social life impairing their work and intimate relations (Bertera, 2005; Pedrosa et al., 2020). Moreover, it is pertinent to understand that adverse mental health is already a pressing issue in Pakistan (Um-e-Kalsoom & Bibi, 2022; Wainberg et al., 2017). According to the available statistics, around 24 million people need psychiatric assistance (WHO, 2009), and around 66% parents mostly women have mental health problems (Kapadia et al., 2015; Rahman & Hussain, 2001).

However, the high prevalence of declined mental health among women could be attributed to the childcare responsibilities asserted to them (Almendrala, 2016) and provision of all the financial needs to men (Akram, 2017).

Evidently, a study by Mirza and Jenkins (2004) illustrated that financial strain gave rise to 34% anxiety and depressive disorders among general population of Pakistan. The numbers spiked as inflation, unemployment, low mental health literacy, and low socioeconomic status contributed to 45.8% depression and 72.2% stress (Nisar et al., 2019). While, with the surge of COVID-19 these external stressors further heightened, mental health issues increased to 39.9% depressive and 57.7% anxiety symptoms were reported by the general population during COVID-19 pandemic (Ullah et al., 2022).

Considering the cultural outlook, the ongoing pandemic further contributed to elevating parental responsibilities, thereby, threatening their mental health, as 70% parents reported declined mental health and 55.3% due to parental responsibilities (Czeisler, 2021). Parenting related stress and exhaustion due to the situation of COVID-19, further elevated parental burnout among married individual's (Griffith, 2020). Considering the rich knowledge of parental burnout among western countries there existed scarcity of indigenous data among developing countries. As parental burnout in Pakistan was examined by a single study by Roskam and colleagues (2021) highlighting parental burnout across 42 countries, reported that there existed 0.5% parental burnout symptoms among parents ($N = 228$) in Lahore. The above-mentioned study was carried out before COVID-19. Thus, it is pertinent to understand the prevalence of parental burnout during COVID-19 and how it has contributed in declined mental health of married individuals during pandemic (with all of pandemic related stressors). Therefore,

the study hypothesized positive association between parental burnout and declined mental health (depression, anxiety, and stress) of married individuals.

Method

Sample

The study utilized purposive sampling technique to collect data from married individuals ($N = 350$) within age range of 25-65 ($M = 35.42$, $SD = 9.29$) from different cities of Pakistan. Married individuals having one or more children were included with undergraduate education and more than 3 years of marriage.

Instruments

Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) 21 items was used to measure depression, anxiety, and stress for the individuals down to 14 years, using a 4-point Likert scale (0 = *did not apply to me at all*) to (3 = *Applied to me very much or most of the time*). The scale consists of three subscales; (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress) with each subscale consists of 7 items having a score range of 0-21. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for all scales were satisfactory (depression $\alpha = .91$, anxiety $\alpha = .84$, and stress $\alpha = .90$) in the normative sample and across clinical samples as it ranged from .81 to .96 (Gloster et al., 2008). Using the cutoff scores provided in original article (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), percentage of depression, anxiety, and stress was obtained in the present study. High scores on the scale indicated decreased mental health as compared to low scores which indicated high mental health of individuals.

The Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA; Roskam et al., 2018).

The Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA) measures parental stress, exhaustion, and depression using a 7-point Likert scale (0 = *never*) to (6 = *Everyday*). PBA contains 23 items, consisting of four subscales: Emotional Exhaustion (9 items), Contrast with Previous Parental Self (6 items), Saturation (5 items), and Emotional Distancing (3 items). The scale consists of a score range of 0-138 thus higher the scores, higher will be the parental burnout. The alpha reliabilities of the subscales were satisfactory (Roskam et al., 2018) ranging between $\alpha = .86$ to $\alpha = .97$. Prevalence of parental burnout was obtained on the basis of a cut off score of ≤ 92 (as the scale ranges between 0-138, as mentioned by Roskam (2018)).

Procedure

The current study was conducted during the second wave of COVID-19, August 2021 to December 2021. Data was collected using convenient and purposive sampling including married individuals with 3 or more years of their marriage and having one or more children. Participants were approached directly at commercial areas, including business vendors, offices workers and part time workers. Ethical consent was taken from Riphah International University. Participants were provided informed consent letters and were briefed about the study. Out of 400 questionnaires distributed, 50 questionnaires with patterned and incomplete response were discarded before the analysis.

Results

Among 350 participants, both male ($n = 161$) and female ($n = 189$) with an age ranged between 25 to 65 ($M = 35.42$, $SD = 9.29$) participated in the study. Where 55% individuals belonged to nuclear family system and 44.6% from urban

areas. Additionally, 77% participants had fulltime office job and 46% had part time jobs while using online mode of work. Higher number of married individuals responded that their spouses were unemployed during the pandemic. Participants reported increase in financial strain after COVID-19, as 26.6% participants lost their job, their pays or wages reduced. Childcare and household responsibilities were shared by both partners and the proportion mostly remained the same before and after COVID-19.

From the cut-off scored provided for DASS, the frequency of mental health was observed on the five-band continuum (normal to extremely severe). Higher findings were reported on the normal band of depression (68.9%), anxiety (54.9), and stress (84.3) with females exhibiting higher symptoms as compared to males. The detailed frequency and percentage of the mental health across gender assessed through DASS is reported below in Table 1

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage e of Depression, Anxiety and Stress across Gender (N = 350)

Items	Gender	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
		f %	f %	f %
Normal	Females (n = 189)	137 (72.5)	107 (56.6)	153 (81)
	Males (n = 161)	104 (64.6)	85 (52.8)	142 (88.2)
	Total (N = 350)	241 (68.9)	192 (54.9)	295 (84.3)
Mild	Females (n = 189)	31 (16.4)	23 (12.2)	21 (11.1)
	Males (n = 161)	51 (31.7)	33 (20.5)	16 (9.9)
	Total (N = 350)	82 (23.4)	56 (16)	37 (10.6)
Moderate	Females (n = 189)	21 (11.1)	48 (25.4)	15 (7.9)
	Males (n = 161)	5 (3.1)	39 (24.2)	3 (1.9)
	Total (N = 350)	26 (7.4)	87 (24.9)	18 (5.1)
Severe	Females (n = 189)	0 (0)	11 (5.8)	0 (0)
	Males (n = 161)	1 (0.6)	2 (1.2)	0 (0)
	Total (N = 350)	1 (0.3)	13 (3.7)	0 (0)
Extremely Severe	Females (n = 189)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
	Males (n = 161)	0 (0)	2 (1.2)	0 (0)
	Total (N = 350)	0 (0)	2 (0.6)	0 (0)

Across parental burnout although only 0.6 % showed severed parental burnout.

To test the hypotheses of the study, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was carried out (Table 2). The results indicated significant and positive association between parental burnout and declined mental health of married individuals during Covid-19.

Table 2

Correlational Analysis between Parental Burnout & its Subscales (Emotional Exhaustion, Parental Contrast, & Emotional Distancing) and Mental Health (N = 350)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Parental Burnout	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 Emotional Exhaustion	.93**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3 Parental Contrast	.84**	.75**	-	-	-	-	-	-
4 Emotional Distancing	.74**	.61**	.44**	-	-	-	-	-
5 Fed Up	.78**	.58**	.51**	.56**	-	-	-	-
6 Depression	.50**	.45**	.51**	.35**	.32**	-	-	-
7 Anxiety	.53**	.5**	.52**	.34**	.32**	.75**	-	-
8 Stress	.49**	.46**	.37**	.46**	.35**	.76**	.68**	-
<i>α</i>	.90	.80	.76	.56	.73	.79	.74	.85
<i>M</i>	35.96	22.89	13.20	8.60	14.20	6.88	6.93	8.64
<i>SD</i>	22.66	9.94	6.51	4.27	6.23	4.28	4.49	5.37

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study aimed at exploring the association of parental burnout and mental health among married individual during COVID-19 pandemic. With its unprecedented changes and sudden shift of dynamics, the pandemic posited alarming stressors for parents. The study investigated these stressors so that preventive steps and interventions could be planned for married individuals, particularly for developing countries.

The results of the study indicated that only 0.6 % parents experienced severe burn out. Earlier, before COVID-19, Roskam et al. (2021), carried out their research in 2019 and reported the noticeable 0.5 % prevalence of parental burnout among parents in Lahore, Pakistan among 42 countries. The present findings reported a slight increase in the prevalence from .5% to .6 % since then. Considering the ramifications of COVID-19, the current study also examined the financial strain and its impact on the mental health of parents. The results provided an increase in depression, anxiety, and stress among parents, especially mothers. The homeschooling of children with on and off lockdown, resulted in spike of 6.1 and 4 % depression and anxiety among parents (Brown et al., 2020). This deteriorating mental health was further influenced by financial strain (Wu et al., 2020) and the uncertainty regarding future (Chung et al., 2020). Financial strain assessed through financial strain survey (Vinokur & Caplan, 1987) demonstrated a spike of inflation and increased expenses of married individuals induced due to the inflated situation posited by COVID-19 pandemic. Aiding to this, many parents being unprepared for the sudden influx of responsibilities and expenses reported that their caregiving responsibilities have increased twice along with their financial expenses, and they have been feeling drained out due to the

immense pressure and workload (Goodwin, 2021; Gannagé et al., 2020; Cluver et al., 2020).

The results of the present study were further mirrored by Vigouroux and colleagues (2021), they documented symptoms of parental burnout, saturation, and emotional distancing of parents from their children.

As hypothesized, married individuals experienced increased mental health issues during the tough times of the pandemic (Algethami et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2020; Czeisler, 2021; Cluver et al., 2020). The pandemic was tough for everyone, it bore more explicit challenges to parents as they had to manage a lot of responsibilities along with monitoring and guiding their children in their virtual classes and managing their own office work. This exhaustive routine induced symptom of fatigue, extreme stress, anxiety, and depression among Pakistani parents (Ben-Ari et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020). Existing literature pointed out that any physical health crisis can have negative influence on public mental health (Chan et al., 2007; Earls et al., 2008; Lau et al., 2008; Sprang & Silman, 2013). This could further lead to harsh parenting and ultimately affect children (Griffith, 2020; Chunget al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2020). This situation was and still is alarming for the households of developing countries as the bread earners face financial crisis and limited resources to cater the basic needs of their family along with the challenges of online education. Further, these findings could add to the scarce literature on the impact of parental burnout on mental health of parents during the pandemic.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, parental burnout in the light of pandemic has not been studied so far in Pakistan. However, the extreme stress and anxiety regarding financial situation and children's education were reported by

Zafar et al. (2021). Considering the impact of the recent/on-going pandemic, it is imperative to assess the burnout among parents, so that interventions could be planned for any uncertainty.

Implications

The findings of the present study can provide literature support for the on-going pandemic as well in devising preventive and intervention plans to curb any upcoming uncertainty. These findings could be a baseline for awareness sessions and parental self-help modules for developing as developed nations. Further given the scarce awareness of family counseling and couple therapy in Pakistan and its practice, the current findings can highlight the need for family therapy or counselling sessions, providing means to enhance marital stability protecting the basic units of society.

Limitations

The current study has its limitations as the study didn't use a longitudinal method to survey the parental burnout before and during different waves of COVID-19. This could be of help for future research.

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